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ABSTRACT

This paper describes research that is part of an effort to understand the transition made when teacher education students leave university programs and enter the workforce. The emphasis in this study was on the alignment between the pre-service teacher's university preparation and the actual work of student teaching. The theoretical framework for this research was taken from activity theory. The case study of a pre-service elementary school teacher as she worked under the guidance of a cooperating teacher in a third grade class is presented. The student teacher's pre-service program emphasized a constructivist approach to learning, but in the classroom, her efforts to use the conceptual tool of constructivism and the practical tools under its umbrella were discouraged by the guidance she received. The substantial misalignment between the values of her pre-service program and those of her student teaching setting made her wonder if she would become the traditional teacher she had been taught to critique. From the perspective of activity theory, the researchers note that a strong misalignment can have consequences for teachers' early career identity as conceptions of teaching must be accommodated to techniques they have been taught to consider ineffective or even detrimental to children. (SLD)

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An Analysis of University/School Alignment during Student Teaching

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This panel will feature a set of papers conducted through the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement, under the general heading of *Learning to Teach Language Arts: A Perspective from Activity Theory*. The three papers all report studies conducted in different parts of the country, yet share a theoretical framework and follow the same design. The theoretical framework is borrowed from activity theory, emerging from the cultural psychology of Vygotsky and focusing on the role of settings in the development of concepts. We will refer to some key notions of activity theory during our presentations, primarily those of a setting (the environment in which activity takes place), tools (implements through which people carry out actions—including both conceptual and practical), and appropriation (the grasping and usage of a tool). It would require a lengthy orientation to explain these concepts at length; for now we refer you to a technical report available on the web, where they are fleshed out and illustrated in detail.

The research as a whole is designed to understand the transition made when students leave university programs and enter the workforce. The design is longitudinal, following early career teachers from student teaching through their first year (or first three years) of teaching. We will focus on their early-career experiences today, basing our reports on data that include gateway interviews just prior to student teaching, three cycles of observations and interviews during student teaching, and group concept map activities both before and after student teaching. Similar data collection procedures were followed when following the teachers into their first jobs.

The research questions that guided today's presentations were:

- What conceptual and practical tools for teaching English/Language Arts were emphasized in the key settings of their university programs (e.g., coursework, supervision during student teaching)?
- What tools did the preservice teachers in our sample appropriate, and to what degree?
- What institutional/programmatic factors affected the ways in which the preservice teachers appropriated these tools?

My own work on this project took an unexpected turn when I changed jobs after the first two years. I then essentially replicated my first two years of data collection at my new institution, giving me a larger number of participants yet only two years of longitudinal data. Today I will report on one of the cases from the first of these institutions, an elementary school preservice teacher I'll call Shelly, particularly as she worked under the mentorship of her cooperating teacher in a third grade class, whom I'll call Carolyn.

ACTIVITY SETTING: UNIVERSITY PROGRAM

I'd like to briefly describe the emphasis of the preservice program attended by Shelly. The program was designed so that the students took classes in a cohort group. Prior to student teaching, they took a block of 5 methods classes, including one in Language Arts, each with a 30-hour field experience component. The program faculty presented a coherent instructional philosophy that emphasized what they called constructivism, which they contrasted with what they called traditional instruction. As we gathered from our interviews with the elementary school participants and information provided by program faculty members, the dichotomy worked as follows:

<u>Traditional</u>

1. Teachers and texts are authoritative. This assumption includes the corollary that the role of students is to remember the knowledge passed on by teachers and texts and to demonstrate their knowledge by reporting it correctly on examinations.

2. Knowledge is fixed and transmitted: Knowledge, in this conception, is immutable and thus can be both transmitted intact and recalled for assessment. The locus of attention is on teachers and their knowledge rather than students and their interests.

3. Teachers rely on textbooks for curriculum and materials: These assumptions about authority and knowledge transmission suggest the need for particular kinds of texts, those that provide the arena for assessing students' mastery of fixed knowledge. Shelley characterized traditional teachers she had by saying, "I did kind of what I was told to do."

Constructivist

Constructivist teaching, in contrast, centered on providing the environment in which students had the opportunity to construct meaning for themselves. Constructivist teaching included the following traits:

1. Learning and learners are the focus: The elementary preservice teachers contrasted traditional teaching with approaches that focused on students and how they make sense of the texts they read and produced. By caring about and respecting students' ideas and feelings, teachers can help students construct not only knowledge but positive self-images.

2. Students' activity is stressed: The emphasis on students' construction of knowledge suggests that classrooms need to be organized to allow for students to move about and manipulate their environments. Rather than receiving knowledge, as in

traditional approaches, students are here expected to construct it through activity in a stimulating environment.

3. The emphasis on learners suggests attention to diversity: Viewing students as individuals was tied to the notion that teachers should view their work as caring for the whole child and not simply transmitting knowledge from texts to students.

4. Appropriate materials include literature and writing, with meaning constructed by the learner. A constructivist approach suggests attention to students' interests in selecting books. In this approach the curriculum is more flexible, with students having more choice in the materials through which they can construct their own knowledge.

5. Knowledge is connected rather than being isolated into subject areas, parceled into curriculum strands, and divided into component parts.

Cooperating Teacher

Warren G. Harding Elementary School was one of nine elementary schools in a college town of around 90,000 residents. Any mention of Harding school to university faculty or teachers in the district brought the response, "Harding is a very traditional school." The belief in Harding's adherence to "traditional" means of education referred to the school's emphasis on workbooks as the primary vehicle of instruction, an emphasis on student discipline, and other instructional approaches that stress "basic skills" presented as building blocks for literacy. The workbook activities in the lessons observed provided little room for students to construct meaning, instead requiring them to produce language in proper form in response to text-generated prompts and questions. The roles for teachers and students were those that typically follow from such instruction: that is, teachers occupied highly authoritative roles in the classroom and assumed their

responsibility to be that of a powerful broker between the authoritative instruction in the textbooks and the students, whose role concerned mastering the information transmitted by teacher and text.

Carolyn was an experienced teacher in the town's school system. She was in her nineteenth year of teaching, 17 of which had been in Harding school in the same classroom. For the past eight years she had mentored student teachers, often one each semester. She was a figure of some authority within the school and school district, being the "head teacher" in her school, a position that made her in effect the school's assistant principal. Whenever the principal was out of the building, Carolyn was in charge. During Shelly's student teaching Carolyn could often be seen leading meetings in the school's media center adjacent to the classroom. Carolyn described herself as a "very confident" person even during student teaching, and her confidence translated to a great sense of authority in her relationships with students and adults throughout the school and district.

In her own teaching Carolyn followed the school curriculum faithfully. Her lessons, and those she required Shelly to teach, followed the outline of the school's basal reading series. Carolyn exhibited her authority in the firm control she exercised over students in terms of discipline and in the ways in which she organized and presented lessons. Furthermore, her room was decorated in a manner that suggested that her own priorities were paramount in the classroom. The classroom walls were covered with the letters of the alphabet, posters stressing correct language usage, and other artifacts that revealed the values of the curriculum. The walls included no work produced by students.

This display suggested an emphasis on Carolyn's sense of what was important for students to learn rather than students' response to her priorities.

The constructivist emphasis of the university's pre-service program stressed methods of teaching that were learner-centered, with students using material from their environments (including school books) as the means to new constructions. Shelly's anticipation of her student teaching was based on the assumption that students should be involved in generative, often collaborative activities that enabled them to experience cognitive changes. Among the assumptions behind this approach was that engagement in constructive activities would minimize behavioral problems and mitigate the need for a classroom management plan.

Carolyn's approach to teaching, however, was quite different, and her commanding personality made it difficult to negotiate any space for Shelly to teach in ways other than those specified by Carolyn. The interview with Carolyn about her supervision began with the following exchange:

> Q: When you work with Shelly, what are the kinds of things you look for in her teaching?
>
> Carolyn: I look for classroom management, rapport with the children, well-prepared for her lessons and it's not done at the last minute, the way she carries herself, I look for voice tone, I look for all those qualities.
>
> Q: Why are those the things you focus on in student teaching?
>
> Carolyn: If they're not well prepared, they don't have voice tone, they don't have rapport with the children, it doesn't matter how well they're prepared, the lesson's not going to be carried out. The same with

> classroom management. If she doesn't have control, the best lesson is lost.

Carolyn's interview transcript focused on issues of control, with an emphasis on classroom management. In contrast with the learner-centered emphasis of the university, Carolyn stressed the need for teachers to exercise firm control over students. Much of her feedback to Shelly came in the form of suggestions on how to achieve better discipline, and toward the end of Shelly's student teaching Carolyn used her influence to arrange an interview for Shelly to get a job at another elementary school within the district, working with severely emotionally disturbed children. Carolyn strongly believed that this situation would be of great benefit to Shelly in her career development because she would be forced to learn how to exert disciplinary control over the most challenging students.

Carolyn's conception of good language arts teaching was consistent with Harding school's reputation for traditional values:

> I would place most of my emphasis on I would say structure. Because structure is going to cover any kind of expository writing, where you have, if the child can write a good sentence, then they've got some of the basic skills of capitalization and punctuation, complete thought, and I feel like by the time they leave third grade a good language arts basis for a child would be to be able to write that solid paragraph, and that's going to include spelling. . . . Language Arts starts with being able to write and know the basic skills.

Carolyn elaborated on her view of basic skills, stressing that "to be able to have it correct, we've got to have all those other things in place. Spelling, and I also place a great emphasis on grammar, correct verb agreement." To achieve this she believed in "the old-fashioned diagramming of sentences" which she thought the university should emphasize in its pre-service education program. Her conception of good Language Arts teaching boiled down to providing a foundation in grammar: "I don't care if it's reading or writing because all of your workbooks that go with your basals in reading, those aren't just comprehension skills, those are language skills."

Carolyn's account of her values was well illustrated in the lessons observed during Shelly's student teaching. The class was arranged according to routines built around the material in the basal reading series. Students were expected to move briskly from lesson to lesson with minimal off-task conversation. In the typical lesson a story would be accompanied by a series of worksheets in the supplementary workbook. One might be on vocabulary in which students classified words. Another vocabulary worksheet might be on Using New Words, with students matching definitions with words and putting words in blanks in a pre-written paragraph. Another worksheet might be on Comprehension, with students being instructed to "Complete the summary of The Recital" by filling in facts from the story. Each worksheet page also had a generative task at the bottom of the page. A typical such task might say, "On separate paper, write a paragraph about your favorite kind of music. Use three words from the box. Or: Pretend your friend is very nervous about making a mistake. On separate paper, write three sentences of your own telling your friend what to do to stop worrying.)." Throughout the observations, whenever they would come to the generative question at the bottom of

the page, Shelly would say, "No bottoms"--that is, students were instructed not to answer the generative questions. Students would mark them out with large X's and move on to the next worksheet.

Carolyn's approach to mentoring Shelly was in the mimetic tradition (Jackson, 19xx); that is, Carolyn assumed that Shelly would learn how to teach by imitating her methods as closely as possible. Carolyn stated that

> Carolyn: A teacher learns to teach by first, observation. . . . Then I'd say the modeling by the teacher consultant. I can see myself in Shelly because she's taken on a lot of the classroom management skills I have. . .
>
> Q: So it's a combination of watching and then how would you describe that second part, you know, you said observing good models of teaching and then--
>
> Carolyn: Internalizing. She will be internalizing. I would say that when an intern first comes to you they are trying to internalize I would say more classroom management skills because the university cannot teach that. That is by experience. Then as she tries her wings or his wings on different subjects with feedback from me then things are corrected, things are added. . . .

In Shelly's view there was little opportunity for constructing a personal teaching style within Carolyn's mimetic mentoring approach. She often expressed frustration at the lack of opportunity she had to teach according to the principles she'd learned in her pre-service program. At one point she said in frustration, "Sometimes I'm afraid I'm going over to her side." When asked to elaborate she said that because she had been

provided so little opportunity to practice the methods learned in her university program, she would lose that knowledge altogether. Particularly troubling to Shelly was the prospect of getting her first teaching job in a school with values similar to Harding's where the prevailing values would pressure her to teach with basals, with an emphasis on classroom management, and with a curriculum built around isolated literacy building blocks. Such an environment, she said, would likely lead to further erosion of the constructivist principles she had learned and, without an opportunity to engage in constructivist practices, to the other "side" of the profession that she had been taught to critique and avoid. The instructional approach Shelly felt compelled to take as a result of Carolyn's influence and expectations and Harding's traditional environment was thus at odds with the constructivist approach that had been emphasized in Shelly's preservice program.

To conclude: Shelly's effort to appropriate the conceptual tool of constructivism, and the practical tools that fell under its umbrella, was discouraged by the guidance she received in the setting of her student teaching experience. The substantial misalignment between the values of her preservice program and those of her student teaching setting caused her to fear that she would go over to the other side and, with no opportunity to engage in constructivist activity, become the traditional teacher she had been taught to critique. The full range of cases in my data and that of my colleagues reveals a broad range of degrees of alignment between university coursework and school setting; and as some have argued, the jury is still out on the benefits of strong alignment. From the perspective of activity theory, however, we would say that a strong misalignment can have consequences for a teacher's early career identity when they must continually

accommodate their conceptions of teaching to those that they feel are ineffective and at times detrimental to children.